

**Lister Sinclair**

Good evening. I'm Lister Sinclair, and this is "The Education Debates" on *Ideas*. Since the 1980's a spate of books has lamented the decline of the liberal arts in contemporary universities. From The Closing of the American Mind to The University in Ruins, these books have used images of decline, decay, and death to picture the shaky state of the humanities. Their point of view is summed up in a recent essay by Leon Craig, a professor of philosophy at the University of Alberta. "Liberal education," he writes, "has but a furtive and beleaguered existence in the modern university." Yet, in the midst of this gloomy rhetoric, there has also been a revival of the liberal arts in recent years. From the Foundation Year at the University of King's College in Halifax to the Arts One program at UBC, to Carleton's new College of the Humanities, new great books programs have been created across the country. Tonight we look at both sides of the condition of the liberal arts in Part 14 of "The Education Debates" by David Cayley.

**David Cayley**

The most widely read book on education in recent memory must surely be the late Allan Bloom's The Closing of the American Mind. When Time magazine interviewed Bloom in 1988, the year after the book was published, he reported that 800,000 copies had already been sold and presumably many more have been sold since. The book's original title, according to friends of Bloom's, was Souls Without Longing, a name that gives a good idea of the book's argument, though it might not have produced the same vogue as the one the publisher gave it. According to Bloom, the souls of today's students have grown dull and jaded, and the great majority have lost the passion for ideas, the taste for the sublime, and the desire for truth that animate the life of the mind. For this he blames a variety of contemporary phenomena: among others the coarse, desensitizing character of popular culture, the sexual revolution, lack of religious training, and a weakening of the family. Once, he says, students arrived at the university in an eager, innocent, idealistic state - now they arrive as precociously wise-up relativists, with few illusions left to lose. Consequently, Bloom believes that liberal education lacks what he calls a "soil" in which it can take root. Most students no longer read with any real intensity. As captives of the glittering, technologically-expanded present, they will not readily believe that old, hard-to-read books hold any great or worthwhile secret; and, as persons without deep religious or moral foundations, there is as little for education to work against as there is for it to work on.

Bloom's critics, who have been as numerous as his supporters, have denounced this portrait as a caricature; but, even for them, the book has served as a touchstone. Many similar lamentations would follow, but Bloom's remains, for me, the broadest, the most philosophically articulate and the most charming of these books. I have taken it as my starting point here because it set the terms for a continuing discussion about the vitality and purpose of liberal education in the contemporary university, a discussion I want to take up again tonight.

In preparing the program I talked with three professors, all engaged in expounding old and enduring books to undergraduates. The first, Clifford Orwin was a student, and later a friend and colleague of Allan Bloom's. He teaches political philosophy at the

University of Toronto, and his most recent book is an anthology he co-edited called The Legacy of Rousseau. Orwin has long been a reader and student of the 18th century French philosopher, but he says that Rousseau's philosophy of education is in many ways the antithesis of his own approach to liberal education.

### **Clifford Orwin**

The presumption in Rousseau is that human beings are free to begin with and that bad education enslaves or subjects them, so that what is required is what Rousseau calls a negative education, an education that preserves that initial freedom from the subjecting tendencies of society. Liberal education, as traditionally understood, agreed with Rousseau that the opinions of society subject us, limit us and prevent us from becoming human beings in the full sense. But it took the view that there was no natural freedom, that all human beings were born into societies, that all human beings grew up as members of societies, with the opinions that defined membership in that society, that we all are in need of liberation and that the purpose of reading great works from other times and places was precisely to free one's mind from the too narrow perspective on life in which one is raised no matter what society one is raised as a member of. So the whole purpose of a liberal education was not to impose views on the individual, but to give him the where-with-all to critically evaluate the views that were imposed on him by his society. This is the view of liberal education that I take. This is the view of liberal education that is opposed, obviously, by those who regard liberal education in so far as it's centered on books from the Western tradition, as an imposition of the Western tradition, understood as something monolithic and homogeneous, on the minds of the students. My claim would be that the Western tradition was never monolithic, never homogeneous. For one thing, what defines the Western tradition and is the source of its vitality is the tension between reason and revelation, which would necessarily permeate any education in the classics of the West. And because I view liberal education as itself liberating in the most significant way, and because freeing our minds is obviously the crucial aspect of any liberation, I welcome the broadening of liberal education to include non-western works. I have no objection whatsoever to broadening the so-called canon. But if the reason given for broadening the canon demolishes the canon, for the reason is that it is inherently oppressive or elitist to regard some books as more worth reading than others, some thinkers as more worth considering than others, that of course makes liberal education simply impossible and that viewpoint I strongly oppose.

### **David Cayley**

Liberal education, as Orwin conceives it, has certain prerequisites. The very idea rests on a distinction between those studies which are free, which is what liberal literally means, and those which are bound to some practical end. Such freedom demands uncommitted time, a sheltered space, and a certain withdrawal from worldly urgencies. Such conditions were once supposed to define universities, but Orwin says that during the twenty odd years of his teaching career they have become more and more rare.

**Clifford Orwin**

I think that it's increasingly the case that the attitude of the students toward the university is primarily a vocational one, that they don't come to the university with very high expectations that what they learn there is going to change their lives. Rather they expect it to qualify them for further professional study or for immediate entry into the job market. Now, of course, that was always a concern of students. Universities have always fulfilled a quasi-vocational function. There's no doubt about that. But it seems to me that one of the ways in which it's less pleasant to be a teacher at the university now than it was when I first came is that it's ever harder for the students to get their heads into their studies. For one thing, increasingly they hold part-time or even full-time jobs outside the university. There are an extraordinary number of students now who hold full-time jobs while also trying to be full time students and it seems to me that that's virtually an impossible combination. Their heads tend to be in their jobs, not in the university and they tend to ask of the university that it provide them with a degree with the minimal amount of commitment of their time. Inasmuch as university has ceased to be a place where students can reflect on the society without being fully subject to all its pressures, where they can gain a certain detachment on the workaday world, and instead is just an aspect of an increasingly frantic workaday world, that I think has been very bad for the experience of learning and teaching.

**David Cayley**

This hectic atmosphere, in Orwin's view, makes it difficult for students to sustain the concentration demanded by classic books. And the difficulty is compounded, he says, by the fact that many are now poorly prepared to enter universities in the first place.

**Clifford Orwin**

It seems to me that the Ontario high schools are less and less emphasizing education in reading and writing. I'm not in a position to comment on the competence of the students in math or science or computers. I simply don't see it. But so far as their basic skills of reading and writing are concerned, those skills, in my view, have very much declined in the last 25 years, partly because the students don't have the store of knowledge which it's necessary to bring to these books in order for them to be intelligible. When you get students who have never heard of the Renaissance or Reformation and you ask them to read a book by Machiavelli they simply don't have that general cultural context, which asking them to read Machiavelli assumes. I say this not because Machiavelli ought to be taught as simply a representative figure of the Renaissance or the Reformation, but because if you don't know anything about the Renaissance or Reformation you won't be able make head nor tail of Machiavelli's presentation of the church or any other aspect of the society of his day.

I also think that they simply haven't had the practice in reading difficult books and writing about them that we used to get in high school. For me the transition from high school to university was one of degree rather than of kind. Already in high school I had read a great many difficult books, Dante, Shakespeare, Milton. I had been asked to write essays on those books. We had teachers who graded those essays very rigorously, both with regard to their content and with regard to their form. That it seems

to me, just isn't there any more. Increasingly students seem to regard difficult books as being written in a foreign language, even if the language in which the book was written was English. They've lost the notion that the very act of reading requires thinking, that one can't read a work without thinking about it, not simply because one can't form one's judgement without thinking about it, because one can't even understand what the author is saying without devoting considerable thought. This is quite alien to them. Some of them are enthusiastic when they discover the possibility and necessity of such reading. Others, however, are very sullen. They regard it as an imposition. High school hasn't prepared them for this and they wonder why it is that their professors are forcing it upon them, especially since again, they don't have the basic commitment to the value of studying these works that the high schools used to try to inculcate.

### **David Cayley**

Yet another difficulty for liberal studies is the challenge that has recently been mounted to the authority of the Western tradition. The challenge is of two kinds. First it is said that this tradition perpetuates a world-view distorted by racism, imperialism and patriarchy and that it is therefore oppressive and in need of revision. Second, it is said that teaching this tradition puts undue emphasis on European heritage and neglects other equally worthy cultures. This second proposition is sometimes called multiculturalism. Orwin has no objection to it, insofar as it asks for a broadening of the curriculum. He himself has undertaken a serious study of Buddhism as part of a book he is writing on the political ramifications of compassion. What troubles him is the relativist interpretation of multiculturalism which holds that all cultures are equal because there are no principles transcending culture by which they can be evaluated. This view renders meaningless the question that lies at the very heart of a liberal education, the question of what is good. Why ask, if all cultures are to be judged only by their own criteria? Orwin thinks that this kind of multiculturalism produces, in Hegel's wonderful expression, "a night in which all cows are black". It's a monoculture rather than a genuine multi-culture.

### **Clifford Orwin**

The monoculture is defined essentially be cultural relativism and what is presumed to follow from this cultural relativism which is the equal recognition of all cultures within the university. So that rather than have diversity one actually has a rather pallid and, in some cases, a quite dogmatic uniformity. That, in essence, what it means to accept multiculturalism is to reject the primacy of western culture in a way, which is dismissive, even hostile and indignant. Somehow western culture is the enemy or the villain in the drama of multiculturalism as that drama is cast in the universities. On the one hand one is deprived, therefore, of any incentive to take the great works of western culture seriously. Either they're irrelevant to us today, anachronistic, outworn, or they're downright oppressive and the effects of their oppressiveness linger with us still. On the other hand, one gains no real incentive to master the great works of non-western cultures, because as a cultural relativist one can't regard any of those cultures as authoritative either. Therefore the teaching of multiculturalism tends to be the teaching of an ideological position rather a genuine broadening by instructing students in the ways of other cultures. So my general view is that the effect of cultural relativism, of

which one might describe multiculturalism as the political wing, is not to broaden the students in any significant way, but rather paradoxically to narrow them.

**David Cayley**

Relativism, according to Orwin, destroys the motive for thinking deeply about the great works of any culture, thus depriving students of any way to escape the shallows of their own preoccupations. On the question of what works have this liberating property, he thinks there is room for wide variation. There need be no set canon, he says.

**Clifford Orwin**

Canon is a word that I never use, because my general view is that canons belong in churches rather than in universities, if by canon you mean a dogmatically authoritative group of writings, such as the word canon arose to describe, that is to say the Bible as it was accepted by the various sects, each having its own canonical version of the Bible. And that, I think, belongs in the church, not in the university. I think canon is a word that is more appropriate for enemies of great books to use and which they use with great gusto because they want to draw the parallel between the university and what they take to be the stultifying practice in the older churches.

I have never taught a work because it was in the canon. Some works in the so-called canon speak to me, others don't. I've even been credited by a fellow scholar with expanding the canon, since my favourite writer, Thucydides, usually described as an historian, was never regarded as a member of the canon of political philosophy, the discipline in which I teach. Yet I've made the case that his exclusion is unjust, that in fact he ranks amongst the greatest political thinkers, proof that even dead white males have been unfairly excluded from the canon. So I teach many works that aren't usually regarded as part of the canon and I don't begrudge my colleagues the right to do the same. I do, however, hold the view that there can be such a thing as a work of permanent human relevance that does speak to human beings as human beings, that's not merely a cultural artifact which incarnates the opinions, the limitations, the injustices of the particular culture from which it springs. I believe that the purpose of education, especially at the university level, is precisely to give one detachment from one's own culture, to teach one to try to view one's culture in a broader perspective than the perspective in which it views itself, to view one's culture impartially. I do think that that's possible. It's the only reasonable goal of a university education, considered as an education the purpose of which is to form whole human beings. And I think that the appropriate means by which such education must proceed is reading the works of those past human beings who have the greatest claim to have succeeded in this objective.

**David Cayley**

Orwin's account of the purpose of a university education is obviously not the view that currently prevails. When provincial governments judge the universities they pay for, they tend to look at labour market outcomes, not the number of students freed from petty and conventional opinions. And yet, Orwin says finally, in the midst of all the discouragements of which he has spoken, he continues to find a certain number of avid and receptive students.

**Clifford Orwin**

I can't be entirely pessimistic because I do believe, on the basis of my own experience as a teacher, that these works do still speak to a significant number of the students who are exposed to them, even if these students have no significant background in such studies. There are students for whom studying these works makes a big difference and because I live in Toronto, the city that no Canadian seems to want to leave, many of my past students still live in the city and I'm forever having the experience of people coming up to me on the TTC and saying 'You won't remember me Professor Orwin, but I was your student in such and such a course and I still read the books that you assigned in that course.' That it seems to me is the ultimate reward for a teacher, that his students looking back on their university years recognize that this aspect of their education was, in fact, the most valuable one.

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**David Cayley**

One of the characteristics of those books that Clifford Orwin calls "works of permanent human relevance" is their ability to reveal and illuminate the situation of their readers. We may be given a clearer view of the unquestioned assumptions on which our way of life rests. Or we may be shown a different world, which reveals the limitations of our own. Leah Bradshaw teaches in the Liberal Studies program at Brock University, in St. Catherine's, Ontario, where she is a professor in political philosophy. She says that one book she has found particularly helpful in making her students aware of their own assumptions is Jean Jacques Rousseau's Émile. The book, part novel, part treatise, part philosophical romance, describes the education of a boy named Émile, a model education designed to produce a citizen in whom the claims of nature and society have been harmonized. It first appeared in 1762, and it has been one of the wellsprings of modern educational thinking ever since. I'll come in just a moment to Leah Bradshaw's account of teaching this book to contemporary students, but, in order to explain the work's peculiar impact, I must first say a bit more about Rousseau's philosophy. It's summed up in what is probably the most famous sentence he ever wrote, "Man is born free but is everywhere in chains." He bases the assertion that we are born free on an imagined state of nature, a state before socialization in which Rousseau claims that humans were independent, self-contained wanderers without the slavish dependence on the opinions of others that characterizes the civilized person. The task that Rousseau sets himself in Émile, Leah Bradshaw says, is to devise a plan of education in which something like this state of nature can be reproduced, while still preserving civil society.

**Leah Bradshaw**

Rousseau starts with this young boy named Emile, who interestingly has no parents, and the boy is brought up in a kind of bubble where he is to be immunized as much as possible from the influence of others. In early childhood Rousseau wants to raise the child, and this is a critical part of Emile, to understand that there is no conflict between his will and the designs of the world. And so everything has to be orchestrated very carefully in Emile's childhood so that he will not experience any tension between his

own independence, his own desires and the obstructions of the world and other human beings. And that's really to produce, I think, in *Emile*, this core of independence which Rousseau thinks is fundamental to what it is to be human. The process of education changes dramatically at puberty, and so once sexuality is introduced his education must be converted to a political education. *Emile* has to be integrated into society. He has to accept political responsibility. He has to accept responsibility for his family. All of that Rousseau tells us emphatically in *Emile*, is artificial. It's not natural. The family is artificial. Politics is artificial. Everything that we associate with civil society is an artifice.

### **David Cayley**

Émile is incorporated in these artificial structures through his attachment to an idealized woman named Sophie. She is introduced, Leah Bradshaw continues, about two-thirds of the way through the book.

### **Leah Bradshaw**

Sophie's education is to be dramatically different. From early childhood Sophie is to be instructed that she has no independence, that she is to be completely governed by the opinions of others, that she is to have no views of her own and their union is supposed to be the foundation of all of *Emile's* assumed status as a good citizen, as a dutiful citizen of the world. Political community, from Rousseau's point of view, is in some ways orchestrated by women. It's women who have a vested interest in permanence and stability and community and civility because they have a vested interest, according to Rousseau, in keeping men attached to the family and attached to political structures and so on.

### **David Cayley**

Women have this vested interest in the first place as child-bearers, Rousseau believes. The dependence this imposes on them makes them promote the passage from the natural to the civilized state. They civilize, as in Sophie's case, by their obedience. As Allan Bloom puts it in the introduction to his translation of *Émile*, "Woman rules man by submitting to his will and knowing how to make him will what she needs to submit to." These sexist ideas, according to Leah Bradshaw, have little appeal for her students. And yet, she says, they are deeply drawn to the portrait of Émile.

### **Leah Bradshaw**

In the early part of the book, Rousseau sets up *Emile* to want to be completely sovereign over himself. He wants to be completely free. He wants to live this life where he experiences no conflict between his desires and the world. What I realized when I first taught this book is that my students immediately identify with that, more than with any other text I had ever taught. They read this and their response for the most part is, this is absolutely right. This is exactly the way I think children should be raised. This is exactly what I want. I want sovereignty. I want independence. I want there to be a complete congruence between what I want and what the world will offer me.' So I found that was amazing as a pedagogical tool because it drew them into philosophical questions in a way that I didn't find with any other text.

What I do is, I have them read the Emile book by book so they don't have any overarching view at the beginning of what's coming; and, if they read carefully, when they get to Sophie they're stunned. They're stunned. The women are outraged. They get to Sophie, and they say 'This is not me. I feel like Emile. I want what Emile has. I don't identify with this at all.' And even the male students, when they get to Sophie, they say well, we don't buy this at all. But what they all agree on is that they like the portrait of Emile, the males and the females. Now what does that say? What that says to me, by the end of the book, is that this tenuous basis on which Rousseau has really rested civility, politics and the structure of the family is unfathomable to these students. They don't accept it. When I see that students don't accept anything about his construction, but they accept the rudiments of his view of what natural human beings are like, then I see it as my task as a teacher to try to move from there to show them why their fundamental vision of human beings is wrong, because I don't believe it's true.

### David Cayley

What Leah Bradshaw hopes that her students will see, through her explication of Émile, is the inadequacy of the modern account of society as an artificial and merely contractual arrangement. She is then able to lead them towards what she regards as a truer account of things.

### Leah Bradshaw

An older view, which I find in Plato and Aristotle, is that human beings are born into an order. I'll use Aristotle's famous statement here that man is by nature a being who lives in a *polis*, or man is by nature a political being. And what Aristotle means by that is not that human beings are instinctively political but that human beings are born with a predisposition toward living in communities and even above that, a pre-disposition toward the pursuit of truth. That's what human beings are. Their nature gravitates in that direction. Now Aristotle understood perfectly well — you can find passages in Aristotle that illuminate this — that it's possible to strip human beings down to their instinctive components, which would give you a much cruder picture of what human beings are, but human beings in their fullest sense are these beings who live not just for themselves, which is Rousseau's picture, but they live for others, both in family and political community and then ultimately they live for the highest thing which is the pursuit of truth and that's Aristotle's starting point, that that's what human beings are. And so everything that Aristotle prescribes for politics follows from his view, that families, communities and so on are the natural habitat for human beings, and they're natural because they're good.

Now it seems to me that to understand Aristotle and to accept what Aristotle says you have to move to the highest thing in Aristotle, which is that there is order and there is truth and that that informs the way we live as human beings. Rousseau does not have that. Rousseau does not have that understanding of the highest things so he begins with this stripped down view of human beings in their natural condition without any transcendence, if I can use that word. And so of course Rousseau believes that everything about civilization, including the family, political society and I might say even philosophy, is artificially constructed. It seems to me that broadly speaking if you don't



believe that human beings are naturally inclined toward family, community and so on, nothing that you do is going to be able to uphold these things. They're going to crumble. The institutions of civil society, if you ground them on principles that you think are artificial, will crumble. If you ground them on things that you think are natural, they will survive. So this is the big question for me...what is natural? I believe the Aristotelian/Platonic — I put them together, some people wouldn't, but I do — vision of human beings is truer than the modern account through Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau. It's truer because it makes more sense. The problem pedagogically is how do you get students who are historicized into a Rousseauian world to see that it's possible to live one's life with a different vision?

### **David Cayley**

One of the ways of bringing this possibility into view, Leah Bradshaw thinks, is by close reading of works like Emile. Rousseau's book manifests in a fully articulated form, philosophical premises that often remain mute and unexamined in her students' thinking. This is its greatness. Close reading can uncover these buried assumptions and expose their inadequacies.

### **Leah Bradshaw**

What he tries to produce in Emile from an early age is a sense of self-completion, self-containment so that Emile will be a whole person, that he will not feel alienated in the world, that he will be self-sufficient but at the same time able to cope with others in civil society. Now, still the question comes up of course, 'What does that wholeness consist of?' So that's why I go back to the difference between this and the Platonic/Aristotelian version of things. There is no good in Rousseau. There is no articulation anywhere in his philosophy of what that wholeness would lead toward. What is the good that Emile strives for other than a self-satisfaction and self-completion? What's missing is the barometer, if you like, by which you would measure what is a good person as opposed to a not good person? What is a complete life as opposed to an incomplete life? What is a happy life? So I think all those strains are already in Rousseau. To be the person that you want to be or to actualize one's self is actually very central to Rousseau's thesis. The question is, what is the self? What is one's self? And the answer varies. Rousseau does not give you any substantive criteria by which one could judge the self. In that sense he's very contemporary and I think a lot of pedagogical theory follows from this idea that you're supposed to find the child's inner self and realize its full potential, but we can't really talk in any meaningful way about what the potential is. Only Emile knows for sure who he is and what he wants. That comes from Rousseau I think.

### **David Cayley**

Leah Bradshaw is persuaded that the ancient account of human beings as part of a natural order is superior to the modern quest for an unlimited but increasingly empty freedom. She shares this view with many contemporary conservatives, notably Allan Bloom whose Closing of the American Mind I discussed earlier. However, she is not nearly as discouraged, or as derisory, as Bloom about the contemporary student. When Bloom's book first came out, she wrote a long review essay, defending it from the accusation of elitism; but, as time has passed, she says, she has come to question

Bloom's view that today's students have been ruined for humane studies by their cultural conditioning, or what she calls their habituation.

**Leah Bradshaw**

In some ways I think that if one takes Bloom's position seriously then habituation counts for almost everything. If you have a child who has been formed in a certain way, exposed to too many things and whose soul, to use Bloom's terms, has been flattened by things in the world to the extent that the child has no passion for learning and no desire for truth, then that seems pretty dismal. But I guess I've come round to the view, and this is a consequence, it's not abstract thinking, it's from dealing with students, that the material of what's human is more than that. Habituation is something, but it's not everything. So I think that students are not as deracinated by modern experience as Bloom seemed to think they were. See, I agree with him that their experiences are pretty much the way he describes them, but I don't find that students are as incapacitated as Bloom would say they are. The innate yearning is still there, but you have to track it and it's hard to find. It's much harder to teach now, because you do have to plug into this different kind of consciousness. They see everything. They know everything. They do in fact, have a much more varied experience. But I don't think their capacity for learning is truncated because of that.

**David Cayley**

One of the deficiencies most frequently identified in the contemporary student is weakness in reading. Leah Bradshaw acknowledges that exposure to other media has made many of her students impatient readers. But she argues, first of all, that books are not truth's only avenue, and second that her students can be brought to read when they are given clear guidance and assigned manageable amounts.

**Leah Bradshaw**

When I teach the Emile I spend a whole course reading that book. I ask the students every week to read a chunk of Emile. It's not that much, 40 or 50 pages. That's all they read for my class and then I lecture on it and then they come to a seminar and they talk about it. So that's what I do. If I'm doing a serious course on a serious text, I do 40 or 50 pages a week. I find that they can do that and once they get into it and read the arguments and follow it, it works extremely well. They can do it. But you can't ask them to read a whole lot of stuff at once and they have to be trained into close attention to the text. So I stick very close to the text in lectures and very close to the text in the seminars and once, after a couple of weeks, the students realize that's the way a course is going to be done, they love it. They love it because they're not confused. They know exactly what they have to do. They follow the argument. They get lots of backup from the lectures in the classes. I have a lot of students at the end of that course who say 'This stuck with me. I will remember this book the rest of my life.'

**David Cayley**

Seeing this reaction from her students, Leah Bradshaw is not as pessimistic about the outlook for liberal education as many other recent writers on the subject have been.

Inquiry into the nature of things, she says, is something natural to us and, as such, it can never finally disappear.

**Leah Bradshaw**

I think the quest for learning and the quest for truth is a perennial human one. I think it's attached to a coherent sense of order even if that order's not completely knowable and I think it's a question of keeping focussed on that. So reading and writing, as a medium, aren't everything. Of course I love books and I love to read. This has been my life, and I still find lots of students who share this love. I mean I think lots. How many is lots? I have some every year so I think that's lots. I think if you start from the fact that human beings have the capacity for love and human beings have a capacity to know...those things are not destroyed. They're twisted and perverted in all sorts of ways, but I don't think they're every destroyed and so I don't think they're going to go away because I don't think they're the product of artifice. I think they're actually the product of something real.

I actually love to teach and I get a lot from the students and I just find that a certain kind of pessimistic resignation doesn't help anybody. I find teaching to be a very gratifying thing. I find it's really fun, so I'm not at all pessimistic about working in the university as the Millennium approaches.

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**David Cayley**

The liberal arts, by definition, aim at no particular career. As such they have inevitably suffered in the more pressured, more vocationally oriented atmosphere of today's university. But, at the same time, there have been a number of energetic local revivals of the study of the great books and the great themes of science and art. In 1996 the Liberal Studies Association of Canada was established to link a number of new and continuing programs of this kind. One of the most notable of the new initiatives has been The College of the Humanities at Carleton University. Founded in 1995, the college offers its students a common four-year curriculum in the liberal arts, which comprises nearly half of their full academic program. Peter Emberley is the director, and the prime mover in the college's creation. He says that it was born out of difficulties that Carleton was experiencing in the early 1990's.

**Peter Emberley**

I think that any founding ultimately arises out of a certain crisis and out of a certain recognition that things need to be renovated and things need to be reformed in order to stay healthy. And certainly Carleton University was in such a situation four or five years ago as a consequence of a very bad rating in MacLeans, personally I think absolutely undeserved. Carleton faced massive declining enrolments, but much more seriously, a crisis in morale. There was not only a crisis in the faculty and the senior administration of this university, but also in the students themselves. Increasingly many students were saying that their experience of Carleton University was that there was no sense of community, that the university had become commuter university, that they were

increasingly understood as clients or as isolated consumers of the services of the university and they didn't feel like they belonged to this veritable institution that they had been drawn into. (I should say that in subsequent experiences across Canada I discovered many young Canadians were saying the same thing about their universities everywhere else.) So I had done a bit of writing on education, primarily focussing on the notion of a community of scholars and what it is to be part of the university as a community and I was asked to put together some kind of program. There were no definite contours to what "some kind" might mean, but it was to somehow draw students back and make them feel that there was a community to which they belonged and to which they could really contribute and be morally passionate about. So I struck a committee and we met over about a year and a half and quite appropriately as researchers and scholars we looked at all the various pedagogical models available and read all the current research and looked carefully at a number of liberal arts programs around North America and Britain and finally decided that the best way to instill the notion of a community and to instill the notion of citizenship within that community and to give students a rich intellectual life was to produce a core curriculum and to focus on three very traditional subjects, namely history, philosophy and literature. We also decided, in opposition to the whole tradition in education of giving students freedom and autonomy to create their own curriculum, that ours would be an utterly prescribed curriculum. The idea was not really to diminish students' creativity but to ensure that they had a common experience with their peers and were exposed to the same kinds of material that could then be the basis of what we thought would be richer conversations. Parallel with this discussion over a year and a half as to what the curriculum might look like we also pursued private funding because it was our feeling that it was time to make a statement in Canada that the humanities are absolutely essential to the Canadian educational life and that it would be a very symbolic expression of that to have private corporations or private foundations fund a program like this. So we pursued private funding at the same time and were successful in finding that private funding. We also decided — and this was certainly disputed — to make this an elite college. We would not admit students who had grade averages of less than 80 and in fact, as it worked out when the applications started to pour in, the cumulative grade average of the first two years was 88.6 percent in both years. So we were certainly looking at very high achievers. We didn't focus however, exclusively and narrowly on grades. We also requested from the students very extensive portfolios of written and creative work. So it became a school that was really designed for students who had already shown extraordinary scholarly promise and the curriculum we were providing them would build on that and take them in directions they hadn't yet thought of.

**David Cayley**

The emphasis on excellence here ...you've chosen excellent students. You've given them excellent facilities. In various ways they're privileged. How do you justify that?

**Peter Emberley**

Well, I think that the young people who we've attracted to the college are individuals with extraordinary capability and a capability that could also be very dangerous if it isn't formed well, if it isn't shaped and matured. I say that because we see in the portfolios

extraordinary creativity, but we also see some real darkness. There's no question that they've imbibed very, very deeply from the culture around them, a culture that has many images of death and indecency and inhumanity and we see that in the portfolios we receive. So I think that this group of individuals is a particularly dangerous one and also potentially very enriching one and so I think that insofar as we give them such a very careful education and we do try mould their characters I think we exercise a certain degree of responsibility and accountability to society.

**David Cayley**

The molding of character, Peter Emberley says, is not brought about by overt moralizing. Rather it involves a fostering in the students of a certain stance or disposition. He speaks of a "psychic tonality" - a note sustained in the soul - and he believes this intellectual mellowing to be a more reasonable and more achievable goal for education than the propagation of doctrines.

**Peter Emberley**

The great difficult task in teaching is that as soon as you start to state what you believe is good and worthy of being considered seriously in propositional form it is very easily misunderstood, and it is very easily opposed by an alternative also placed in propositional form and very often the kinds of debates that ensue end up being zero sum games. There is an exchange of propositions. One person's is a Thomist. One person is a Marxist. They're incompatible propositions that are being put forward and in the process I'm not sure if one is really teaching, particularly if the dispute is with a student. So in my mind, I think that our real task as teachers is to form certain types of experiences and I think that the notion, and I draw this unabashedly from George Grant, the notion of reverencing is a very important one. I think that much about our contemporary culture encourages the notion of empowerment, encourages the notion that everything is a challenge to be overcome. But the idea that somehow there are things that we ought to just reverence and before which we can only stand with a degree of wonder and awe is a very important ingredient of what it is to be a human being. Out of this idea arise some very important intellectual virtues and some very important moral virtues. One example is our sense of humanity. You can't teach somebody to be humane; you can't teach somebody to be charitable. But what you can try to do in education, in myriad ways, it may be a reverencing of nature, it may be a reverencing of great authors, it may be a reverencing of the simple goodness of life that some people seem to personify and exemplify, is to create a certain tone in a person that creates of itself certain moral virtues, a certain moral character and ultimately a certain intellectual mode of life as well. So I think that the greater part of education is to form that kind of tonality in people and let the doctrinal propositions or more metaphysical propositions arise on their own.

**David Cayley**

Peter Emberley believes that this tone can be made to sound in the present generation as in any other. In this sense, he shares Leah Bradshaw's belief that the yearning of the young for meaning and direction is perennial. But he does recognize the special difficulties that are created by the speed of modern media, by what he earlier called the

indecencies of popular culture, and even by the schools in which his students have previously been trained.

**Peter Emberley**

There is a kind of restlessness, and the school environment encourages that. Much about modern culture encourages that so one of the most difficult things is just to have the students sit for a while. We don't cultivate that. We don't cultivate it through meditation, or prayer for example, that one just sit for a period of time. Most of the students who confess to me that they have grave difficulty reading books that I prescribe to them say they can't sit long enough to actually be absorbed by the book. Of course the other major thing is that much of the school experience in Canada encourages a critical stance and the view that you have to have a point of view about a book. And so the notion of being caught up in a book and being absorbed by a book is very foreign to them. So there are hurdles, but I don't think that they're insurmountable and I dislike the kind of argument from historicity or the argument from environment, that the young people who are in our classes today are in fundamental way different from the students of 20 years ago or 30 years ago. I think that the idiom through which they express themselves is very much conditioned by things like the mass media and the political idiom of the day but I think we're dealing with the same drama of longings and predicaments that comprise what a human being is. I think our task is to try to meet them at some point and seduce with a wide array of techniques, a passion that is nascently there and inchoately there and can be formed in the process of creating the patience and the leisureliness that takes books seriously.

**David Cayley**

Peter Emberley and his colleagues have been successful in creating this kind of atmosphere at the College of the Humanities. The fact that the College has prospered, attracting both eager, capable students and private support, shows, I think, the continuing vitality of the liberal arts. Those who believe that the university should be about "the best that has been thought and said," in Mathew Arnold's famous phrase, may increasingly occupy only enclaves and small pockets within the institution, but they will still be there.